

A Tale of Intellectual Repression and its Humiliating Defeat

Book Review

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The Zhivago Affair by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, Harvill Secker, London 2014

Boris Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* was published in 1957, my last year at secondary school, and led to the award for its author of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1958, my first year at university. David Lean's film of the novel, starring Omar Sharif and Julie Christie (among others), was released in 1965, my second year of full employment after the completion of my second degree. So I am, as it were, of the "Zhivago generation," although I have to confess that it was the film, with its glorious presentation of the heroine, Lara, together with its inspired musical theme composed by Maurice Jarré, that first aroused my intense interest in the story. By then I had already determined that poetry was to be my vocation, as it has been ever since, so that identification and empathy with the tale's hero was inevitable. In 1968 *Quadrant* published my poem "Meeting at Varykino", an elegy for both Yury Zhivago and Pasha Antipov based on the latter's tragic suicide.¹ In 1975 my second book of poetry, *The Hare and the Rowan*,² appeared with the long title poem celebrating the novel's scintillating love story, a Russian equivalent in intensity and beauty to that in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

As I consider this new literary history of the advent and political effect of *Doctor Zhivago*, I wonder how many of today's twenty-year-olds have any interest in the novel at all. How many of them have even heard of it? Will it become a permanent classic like the Verona drama or gradually fade into the oblivion of books that have passed their time?

For *Doctor Zhivago* and its author, a brilliant poet with the uncanny ability to fashion words into startlingly fresh and original combinations (as did, for example, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas), certainly had their time; and *The Zhivago Affair* is all about that.

The Nazi tyranny had been crushed in thirteen years, but the Soviet equivalent was horrifyingly present and powerful after four decades. The "Cold War" between the communist nations and the "free West" was in full swing; and, thanks partly to the recent publication of George Orwell's grim nightmare of totalitarianism, *Nineteen Eighty-four*, there was widespread fear that the Bolshevik tyranny might spread and engulf us all. Into that context of intense international conflict, struggle and fear, Pasternak dropped his literary bombshell – deliberately and determinedly, as *The Zhivago Affair* shows.

II

The essential significance of the novel is well brought out during this comprehensive narration by Finn and Couvée. "Its power lay", the authors tell us, "in its individual spirit, Pasternak's wish to find some communion with the earth, some truth in life, some love.....*Doctor Zhivago* stood as a rebuke to the short history of the Soviet state..... There was... a disdain for the 'deadening and merciless' ideology that animated so many of his contemporaries." Or, as it was put by John Maury, the US Central Intelligence Agency's Soviet Russia Division chief, "Pasternak's humanistic message – that every person is entitled to a private life and deserves respect as a human being, irrespective of the extent of his political loyalty or contribution to the state – poses a fundamental challenge to the Soviet ethic of sacrifice of the individual to the Communist system..... the heresy which Doctor Zhivago preaches – political passivity –

is fundamental. Pasternak suggests that the small unimportant people who remain passive to the regime's demands for active participation and emotional involvement in official campaigns are superior to the political "activists" favored by the system. Further, he dares hint that society might function better without these fanatics." The CIA chief also wrote that "the basic theme of the book itself [is] – a cry for the freedom and dignity of the individual – but also the plight of the individual in the communist society. The whole Pasternak affair is indeed a tragic but classic example of the system of thought control which the Party has always used to maintain its position of power over the intellectual. Like jamming, censorship and the Party's ideological decrees for writers and artists, the banning of this book is another example of the means which the regime must use to control the Soviet mind. It is a reflection of the... intellectual barbarity, and the cultural sterility which are features of the closed society."

Attacks made on the novel by the Soviet Government and by many of its writers and intellectuals confirm this spiritual significance from the other side. For example, the report of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's culture department asserted that it was "a hostile attack on the October Revolution and a malicious libel of the Bolshevik revolutionaries by an author who was... a 'bourgeois individualist'." And, in rejecting the novel for publication, the editorial board of the literary journal *Novy Mir* stated: "The spirit of your novel is one of non-acceptance of the socialist revolution. The general tenor... is that the October Revolution, the Civil War and the social transformation involved did not give the people anything but suffering, and destroyed the Russian intelligentsia, either physically or morally." The board complained about Yury Zhivago's "hypertrophied individualism", a vice they also saw, no doubt, in the author himself. Historian Christopher Barnes pointed out years later that the authors either missed or did not articulate the novel's "most heretical insinuation: by artistically conflating the Stalinist period with early revolutionary history, Pasternak implied... that the tyranny of the last twenty-five years was a direct outcome of Bolshevism." For Pasternak, Stalinism and the purges were... a natural outgrowth of the system created by Lenin.



Publicity photo of Omar Sharif for film Dr. Zhivago.

Source: By MGM (eBay) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Ian Cummins, reviewing *The Zhivago Affair* for *The Age* in Melbourne on 26th July 2014, perceptively fixed on the novel's "skepticism about the alleged achievements of the Bolshevik revolution and indeed about the possibility of ideologically based political action improving the human condition." He provided an effective supporting quotation from Yury Zhivago within the novel itself: "Revolutions are made by fanatical men of action with one-track minds, men who are narrow-minded to the point of genius. They overturn the old order in a few hours or days... But for decades thereafter, for centuries, the spirit of narrowness which led to the upheaval is worshipped as holy."

Doctor Zhivago, as its author knew when he passed the manuscript of the novel to the West, had taken the communist totalitarian tyranny on head-on in defense of the human spirit.

III

“A weapon in the ideological battles between East and West – this... is part of *Doctor Zhivago's* extraordinary life.” Finn and Couvée devote much of their book to a carefully researched and comprehensive account of this weapon, as it was used by the free world (led by the USA) and as the Soviet Government struggled to destroy or at least blunt it. Robert Chandler, in a review of *The Zhivago Affair* for *The Spectator* which was republished in *The Australian* on 26th-27th July, noted that “the main part of this book is a history, based on original research, of Pasternak’s last years and the publication of *Doctor Zhivago*.” He commented: “This will prove a valuable resource for scholars, though few more general readers will want to know the story in such detail.” That last arrow finds its mark: the narrative of the ideological struggle over the novel does at times become tedious, if not otiose. On the other hand, the exposé of CIA machinations is a usefully sobering reminder of how big-power politics behind the scenes can play an influential role in the cultural life of many nations. The intellectual commissars of the USSR were not the only manipulators in this drama.

It is also good to be reminded of the horrible censorship that exists under tyrannies, especially when one lives in an Australia that has been so easily duped in the last three years into maintaining repressive legislation against public discussion of sensitive controversies involving race and ethnicity. For example, we read that, after Pasternak had been awarded the Nobel Prize, Nikolai Mikhailov, Soviet minister for culture, announced that “it would be up to the writers’ union to decide if Pasternak would be allowed to receive the prize.” As though any such union should have such power over any artist or intellectual! And what a horrible pressure such a situation exerted on other writers, as an orgy of official damnation of the writer was rapidly organized: “The literary community was now ‘gripped by the sickening, clammy feeling of dread’ and it led to a near-frenzy of condemnations. These inquisitorial feelings were an almost ritualistic part of the Soviet literary system that stretched back to Stalin. Error was followed by collective attack. The fallen writer was expected to respond with contrition and self-criticism before being welcomed back in the fold..... The scale of the rhetorical assault and the global attention it drew was unprecedented.”

Fallacious terminology was devised, such as the phrase “internal emigrant,” a slander of Pasternak indeed, in view of his clearly expressed and completely sincere deep and heartfelt love for Russia. Large numbers of the Soviet public were taken in by the official onslaught of disapproval. Finn and Couvée note that historian Denis Kozlov showed how “the revolution remained central to these people’s consciousness and socio-ethical order, the sacred foundation of a mental universe; and their reaction to the Pasternak affair was above all a defence against any attempt, real or imaginary, to undermine this intellectual cornerstone of their existence.” Accounts such as this confirm the importance of political action to maintain and extend political freedom within nations, arduous and sometimes disappointing as such endeavors may be.

IV

The Zhivago Affair contains many insights into the tragedies and ironies of the Pasternak affair. Here the book undoubtedly carries great interest for the general reader. For example, we learn that the love triangle of Yury, Tonya and Lara in the novel mirrors exactly the love triangle of Pasternak, his wife

Zinaida and his mistress Olga Ivinskaya; and in both cases, those of Yury and of his creator, there was an inability to choose between “two families” – an inability that Pasternak left as a jarring discord in the novel itself, which ultimately fails to answer the question of whether or not Yury and Lara were right to become lovers.

Two striking tragedies Couvée and Finn recount concern Olga and Pasternak’s first publisher, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Olga twice conceived by Pasternak, but lost one child by miscarriage (probably due to Soviet brutality towards her) and the other in a stillbirth. It is sad for any lover of the novel to think that this was the fate of “Lara.” As for Feltrinelli, who also deserves to be remembered and admired for his publishing of Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s *The Leopard*, it is sorrowful to read of his moral confusion as he was caught between traditional ethics and socialist ideology, his gradual loss of personal bearings and his sordid death: “On March 15th, 1972, the body of a man was found under a high-voltage electricity pylon in a suburb of Milan..... He was killed when the bomb he and some co-conspirators planned to use to cause a power cut went off prematurely.” It is a pity that Feltrinelli had failed to absorb the parallel wisdom in the two great novels he gave to the world – the wisdom to accept fate without illusion and without negative responses.

Doctor Zhivago was amazingly prophetic in certain ways. For example, just as Lara wept over Yury’s coffined body, so did Olga weep over that of Pasternak. The account of the funeral in *The Zhivago Affair* echoes in several ways that of Yury’s funeral in the novel. And just as Lara was arrested after her affair with Yury and sent to a prison camp in the Gulag, so Olga was arrested after Pasternak’s death and spent several years in forced labor.

It is good, too, to read of the long-term fate of Pasternak’s first wife, Yevgenia Lurye, who also attended his burial. Her son by Pasternak, Yevgeny, was able, finally, to accept on behalf of his father the Nobel Prize in Sweden in the thirtieth year after Pasternak’s death. Yevgenia did not live to see that; but one feels that it was a providential and fitting reward for one who said once, long after he had left her, that she had never stopped loving him. (Pasternak’s second son, Leonid, by Zinaida, had already died well before 1989.)

The Zhivago Affair provides many insights into the chameleon-like character of the poet-author himself. One feels that the head of the Soviet Writers’ Union, Alexander Fadayev, was not wrong to comment on Pasternak’s quality of “aloofness”, which he saw as a blemish, but others might praise. By contrast, Feltrinelli’s assessment (“a voice of a man alien to all political activity” which “transcends all ideological dogmatism”) needs qualification. Pasternak, in real life and in his novel, could express dogmatism of his own; and the novel itself, as well as the activities of its protagonist, are both intensely political, although their politics is subtler and more in accord with truth than that of their adversaries. *Doctor Zhivago* contains several highly dubious assertions about the life and role of Jesus and his place in history. It also adopts an assimilative approach to the problem of being a Jew (Pasternak himself was Jewish) which not unnaturally drew the ire of David Ben-Gurion and others.

However, Pasternak was authentically and profoundly religious in his own way. In a letter to Dmitri Polikarpov, head of the Central Committee’s culture department, he defiantly asserted that “strength comes from on high.” He felt at home within the Russian Orthodox tradition, which he saw as inextricably intertwined with Russia’s soul and the “lost life” of the Moscow intelligentsia among which he had grown up before 1917. His style as a poet is widely recognized as being that of a difficult genius. Ernest Simmons of Columbia University is quoted as follows: “Pasternak’s fresh, innovative, difficult

style [is] notable for its extraordinary imagery, elliptical language and associative method. Feeling and thought are wonderfully blended in his verse that reveals a passionately intense but always personal vision of life." Victor Frank is reported as stating that the novel "is written by a man who has preserved and deepened his freedom – freedom from all external restraints and all internal inhibitions." And Harvard professor Harry Levin commented that "the most extraordinary fact about his career is that, under heavy pressures forcing writers to turn their words into ideological propaganda, he has firmly adhered to those aesthetic values which his writing so richly exemplifies. He has thus set an example of artistic integrity."

Finn and Couvée rightly pay tribute to Pasternak's bravery: "In a totalitarian society he had long displayed an unusual fearlessness – visiting and giving money to the relatives of people who had been sent to the Gulag when the fear of taint scared so many others away; intervening with the authorities to ask for mercy for those accused of political crimes; and refusing to sign drummed up petitions demanding executions for named enemies of the state. He recoiled from the group-think of many of his fellow writers..... he was heckled for asserting [in a meeting] that writers should not be given orders."

Yet *The Zhivago Affair* admits, correctly, that, just as there are significant weaknesses in *Doctor Zhivago*, as well as many great strengths, so Pasternak's personal record of witness contains quite a few ethical smudges and inconsistencies.

Our authors also devote several remarks to the curious attitude that Stalin possessed towards Pasternak, just as he also apparently did to that other courageous writer-rebel, Mikhail Bulgakov. It seems that in each case the despot was psychologically drawn to a writer whom he felt to have some sacrosanct nature which should not be violated. Perhaps even tyrants are susceptible to the promptings of their "guardian angels" in such circumstances.

All in all, Finn and Couvée appear to write with an ideology-free sense of balance and fair play. Personally, I would take issue with their unqualified reference to "the poisonous anti-Communist crusade of Senator Joseph McCarthy" and would query their easy acceptance of the CIA's policy of financing the non-Communist left rather than the right during the Cold War. There may have been less admirable reasons for that policy than the authors realize. But these are minor complaints.

At one stage in the Pasternak drama his US publisher Kurt Wolff told him: "You have moved beyond the history of literature into the history of mankind." This book will help defend that place of honor, and one hopes that it will contribute to a new generation not forgetting the importance of Pasternak and the beauty and spiritual power of his novel.

There is scant reference to the next great Russian novelist to both win a Nobel Prize for Literature and suffer persecution by the Soviet government – Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. At one point Finn and Couvée report that "in Ryazan, a schoolteacher [Solzhenitsyn]... 'writhed with shame for him' [Pasternak] – that he would 'demean himself by pleading with the government.'" At the present time Solzhenitsyn seems himself to be a "writer under tribulation," as is indicated by the extraordinary failure of those holding the copyright to publish in English the last two volumes of his chief work, *The Red Wheel* and his study of Russian-Jewish relations (including during the Russian Revolution), *Two Hundred Years of Living Together*. It seems that some other sinister political power may be engaged in an act of cultural repression; and perhaps Finn and Couvée might turn their attention in another book to this.

Notes:

1 *Quadrant* is Australia's premier magazine of ideas for the Center-Right or liberal-conservative spectrum.

2 The Hawthorn Press, Melbourne.

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